

February 28, 2019

Connecticut General Assembly  
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee  
Legislative Office Building, Room 1800  
300 Capitol Avenue  
Hartford, CT 06106

Chairman Haskell and Haddad and members of the committee,

My name is Bobby Berriault and I am currently at a student at the University of Connecticut School of Law. I am writing in support of Senate Bill 273 – An Act Concerning Debt-Free College, and I want to encourage everyone on the committee as well as in the House and in the Senate to support this bill as well.

I had a really difficult life growing up. As someone who grew up in five foster homes and two group homes, who grew up in poverty and without a family, and who has Asperger's; I was told time and time again – by my teachers and by my guidance counselors at school and other adults that I shouldn't bother having dreams of going to college or becoming a lawyer. They reasoned that my dreams weren't realistic for me. They reasoned that people who don't have a family or don't have money can't succeed in college or become an attorney. They said that my future was in fast food or retail. That was what I was told. Ever since I was in middle school, I knew I wanted to go into politics and law because no person should ever have to suffer the way that I had growing up, and no child should ever be left behind. I followed my dreams, and I still continue to follow my dreams today. Just yesterday, I completed the bar examination. I hope to be able to do great things in life, understanding how incredibly lucky I am to even make it this far, as only 10% of people who grow up in poverty get to go to college and successfully graduate, only 6% of people who grow up in foster homes get to college and successfully graduate, and only 1% of people who are on the autism spectrum get to go to college and successfully graduate. I want to change that. And this Senate bill if it becomes law will help change that.

Since the great recession a little over a decade ago, our community colleges and our state universities have had to endure cuts totaling in the millions of dollars while an entire socio-economic class of potential students are being priced out of the higher education market as the price of tuition has increased over 40% since the start of the great recession, thereby putting college – even community college – out of reach for tens of thousands of people. While it is true that pell grants does cover nearly the full cost at state university and the full cost of community college for those living in poverty and for those who don't live with their parents or don't have a family like myself, there are tons of people under the age of 23 whose parents make a moderate amount of money but even being in the lower middle class or middle class it is difficult for parents to shell out \$15,000-\$20,000 just to put their children through community college. That is where this bill will help people out the most.

While I strongly support this bill, my hope is that it could be amendment to cover part time community college students as well. Most people who attend community college go part time as they can't afford to go full time and not have a job as they are responsible for paying for their rent and mortgage, food, electricity, heat, car, and other expenses on their own. Looking at the demographics, much of the people who attend community college are non-traditional students – single moms seeking better opportunities, adults living in poverty trying to get out of a dead-end career and seeking to get an education. Doing this would help so many people and offer community college to all matriculated students – both part time and full time – and still spend less than a \$100 million dollars doing so.

Investing more money into our community colleges will help our state's economy. According to a recent economic analysis by CSCU, the CSCU system which encompasses the 12 community colleges, four state universities, and the charter oak college contributes \$11 billion annually to the state of Connecticut, with alumni contributing \$9.9 billion in annual income through their earnings. 1 out of 19 jobs in Connecticut is supported by CSCU activities and their students, and for every \$1 spent, students gain \$6.60 in lifetime earnings, taxpayers gain \$3.80 in added tax revenue and savings, and Connecticut gains \$11.70 in added state revenue and savings. That's for every \$1 spent. To every single elected official in the general assembly who campaigned on improving the state's economy, I say this: there is no better way to involve our state's economy, add more revenue into our state budget, lower the unemployment rate, and convince more employers to move to Connecticut and do business here then to invest in our public schools – whether at the primary, secondary, collegial, or graduate levels. And there is no better way to more effectively jump start the state's economy then to put more money and resources then to invest in CSCU and our state's community colleges. Just how small businesses are the backbone of the American economy, our state's community colleges are the backbone of our state's economy.

Finally, to my conservative friends in the general assembly who believes that making college free is a radical idea - I say this: for most of their existence, our state's community colleges and public universities were free. Our parents' generation paid hundreds of dollars per year to attend college while we pay tens of thousands of dollars per year to get the same education they received. And our grandparent's generation got to go to college for free and they received the same quality of education that we are receiving today. At our state universities aside from UConn, tuition wasn't first charged until the spring semester of 1972. The entire original idea of having public universities and community colleges was to provide the public with a higher education at an affordable cost.

And we must not forget, in order for our state and our nation to remain economically competitive with the rest of the world, we must invest more money into our state's higher educational institution's. As countries like Canada, Germany, China and Japan have made decisions over the last few decades to expand access to higher education and make colleges equivalent to our community colleges free for their students, the United States is falling behind economically, and we are losing our competitive economic edge. As neighboring states like Massachusetts and New York have invested millions of dollars into their public colleges since the great recession and made their community colleges free, we in Connecticut cut funding by millions of dollars to our public colleges and we wonder why so many young people are leaving our state to pursue

opportunities elsewhere and we wonder why companies like GE and others have left our state. GE didn't leave Connecticut because they wanted to. They left because it was in their best business interest to move to a place where there is a large pool of highly skilled workers that they can hire from and because Massachusetts invested hundreds of millions in their schools over the last decade while we abandoned our public colleges and universities. It is time for that to change.

Every child deserves to have the same opportunities as everyone else regardless of what family they were born into, or what zip code they live in, and no person should ever be left behind.

I wanted a family. I didn't want to live in poverty. I didn't want to have Asperger's. I didn't want to be abused and neglected living in some of my homes. But those were things that I couldn't control growing up as a child. I am so incredibly lucky to be able to go to community college. Community college is the reason why I am doing as well as I am today, why I have the opportunities that I have today like being in law school. Without community college, I would be homeless or dead by now. Community college was my only avenue for success. And I hope that we can expand opportunities for tens of thousands of people by expanding access to our community colleges so that they can have access to the same opportunities that I have. No person should ever have to suffer the way that I had to growing up. No child should ever be left behind. Every person deserves to have an opportunity to get a high-quality education at a affordable cost. Education is a right for us all, and not a privilege for the few. Please support S.B. 273 and help make college affordable and accessible for all.

Thank you,

Bobby Berriault